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ABSTRACT

In order to teach reading effectively to students who use a nonstandard dialect, the teacher must accept and understand the systems and patterns of that dialect. He can then help his students avoid the characteristics of their dialect which lead to confusion in communication, promote their accurate decoding of standard English as they learn to read, and foster their use of a standard dialect as they learn to write. Sympathetic instruction in standard English as the "universal" dialect will enable students to communicate easily in situations where the standard dialect may be necessary. (JM)

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TEACHING STANDARD ENGLISH AS AN ALTERNATE DIALECT

Kenneth Donelson, editor

An outstanding Arizona educator has the following comments to make about non-standard dialects:

> Reading teachers are coming to realize that much of the general difficulty in teaching the so-called "disadvantaged child" could well stem from a fact that may be stated without reservation . . . and that is that the teacher speaks one language and the child essentially another. In a word, the teacher is trying to teach the child to read a language which the child does not speak. And more specifically to the point, the language spoken by the teacher in these attempts differs decidedly from the language understood by the child, and the language spoken by the child is often incomprehensible to or misunderstood by the teacher.
>
> --Dr. Kenneth J. Smith
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In a sixth grade classroom in a "ghetto" area, a teacher asked one of the students the meaning of the word canal. He gave back the answer, "A dish of water". "What?" almost shouted the teacher. "How did you get the idea that 'canal' means 'dish of water'?" The student mumbled, "I don't know".

The teacher then delivered a long tirade on the concept of "canal" for the class, and then proceeded with the lesson. You can be sure this same student would hesitate in answering any other questions soon.

Lack of communication between teacher and student is one of the basic problems in teaching the culturally different student as the above incident illustrates. If the teacher had been familiar with the dialect of "ghetto-located" schools, he would have known that the student was saying "ditch of water", which was an acceptable response to the teacher's question. The teacher, not being familiar with the dialect spoken, assumed that the student had an erroneous conceptualization of the term "canal".

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Try to imagine the student's feeling in this situation. In the first place the teacher had put him on the spot by picking him out of the crowd. From past experience he thought this certain student might be able to give the right information; but he knew he would not do so voluntarily. The student knew he was defeated when the teacher exploded, "What?" The outcome of this tiny fiasco most likely deepened the student's resolve to keep his mouth shut in the future, and the strengthening of his belief that teachers won't give one credit when one knows the answer.

Other students in the class couldn't clarify the situation because most of them say "dish" for "ditch" just as he does. They, too, were bewildered when the teacher belabored them with the information Fred had so concisely supplied.

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Breakdowns in communication occur hourly in many such classrooms due to the teacher's lack of understanding of the prevailing dialect. This is in spite of the fact that few people need to be told that standard English is virtually a "second language" for millions. Almost every teacher knows students who cannot speak, read or write the sort of English that educated persons consider standard, even though some variety of English may be the student's mother tongue.

Yet, two facts do appear to come as news--good news. One is that some teachers are developing a fresh and clearer view of what is involved in learning a standard dialect of English in schools when some other dialect is spoken at home. A second newsworthy fact, and even a more cheering one, is that these fresh insights have suggested some practical classroom procedures which are being tried with encouraging results. Martin Joos ("Language and the School Child," WORD STUDY, Vol. XI, No. 2, Dec. 1964) who has made a special study of people's attitudes toward language, says:

> "Long before any teacher began to correct his English, the child has learned all he needs to know, at his age, about people and their places; he has developed considerable skill in judging adults by their speech . . ."

Let us go back again to our little episode introduced in the first paragraph. Had this teacher been teaching reading as one aspect of communication rather than as an isolated subject, he would have recognized that he really did not understand the student's answer. He then would not have gone further until he did understand the student.

Other things that the teacher might have discovered were that this same student not only says "dish" for "ditch", but he also says "tess" for "test", "mush" for "much", "ness" for "next", etc. He would find that many of his students routinely fail to enunciate the final sounds of many of the most frequently used words in the language. This habit greatly increases the homonyms in the student's language. In many cases this leads to confusion.

Many teachers still do not realize that reading is only one of the communication skills. Too, the faulty assumption has been accepted that teaching reading is just that--<u>teaching reading</u>. Teaching the child to read who already knows the oral standard patterns of English (textbook English) is not the same as teaching reading to speakers of a non-standard dialect. In fact, as mentioned above, the latter is similar to teaching the reading of a second language.

Let us point out some of these similarities. Teachers should realize that they can do much more for bidialectical students if they learn a few things about the language their students bring to school with them.

Children bring to school with them the language of the community into which they are born. It is many times a non-standard variety of the English language. Undemocratic and unfair as it may seem, the fact is that standard English is "front door" English. And American schools are committed to the task of making it possible for every citizen to enter by the front door if he wishes to do so.

This does not mean that the child's home language is inferior, but that it is different. We will have to grant that people who speak standard English do not invariably communicate any more clearly or forcefully than do speakers of non-standard dialects. Linguists who have studied the so-called Negro dialect report that this non-standard variety of English does have regular characteristics which deviate in systematic and predictable ways from standard patterns of English usage.

Language is a very personal thing. Teachers may make students feel that their natural way of speaking is a shameful thing marred by "errors" that need to be rooted out. He seems determined to wrest the students' familiar dialect from them leaving in its place a language that may well estrange them from homefolks and lifelong friends. (Small wonder that many students resist!) Students frequently get the idea that if the language they use is inferior they themselves are inferior. If constant fault is found with words that come from their mouths, it is also very difficult for children to understand that the teacher is not also finding fault with the lips, tongues, brains, etc. from which the words come.

What is being advocated here is emphatically not an "anything goes" approach to English usage. Standard English is the variety used by the majority of educated people. Charles Fries stated that standard English is that English ". . . used to carry on the important affairs of our country". It is the kind of English used on radio and television by announcers. It is the English heard in the public statements of astronauts, bankers, congressmen, and movie stars. It is the "universal" dialect of our society; it is also the language of the classroom. Standard English is <u>not</u>, however, the language of pre-primers and primers. It is <u>not</u> the stilted, lifeless language of English textbooks, and it is <u>not</u> the stuffy affected English of the purist.

There is system to standard English. Non-standard English is also systematic. These forms differ systematically from each other. This fact forms the basis of many of the problems of bidialectical students. The variety of English that they speak acts as a barrier to their learning of the standard variety. The systems are separate but the dialects are related.

Kenneth R. Johnson (TEACHING CULTURALLY DISADVANTAGED PUPILS, Chicago, Ill., SRA, Unit 7, April 1, 1968) has given examples of the so-called Negro dialect which serve to illustrate this principle of interference and how it impedes normal progress in learning standard English.

One characteristic is the "R-lessness" of the dialect. The final sound represented by the grapheme "r" is often left off. This creates many homonyms in the speech of "ghetto children". The following mistakes are often made:

"dough" for "door"	"mow" for "more"
"foe" for "four"	"flow" for "floor"

You can see how confusing this becomes in reading situations, particularly when one child is reading aloud a strange word like "foe" and the class listening automatically attaches its meaning of "four" as in the sentence, "The foe was seen in the distance". It is ironic to note that speakers of New England English handle their "r's" differently; for example, distorting the final "r" in car and sometimes putting an "r" on the end of such a word as <u>idea</u> so that it sounds like <u>idear</u>. The linguistic consequences of this do not seem to be so damaging to progress in reading in New England; but actually each group is guilty of deviation.

The handling of the "s" sound in certain common speaking situations is another of the characteristic deviations from standard English found in the so-called Negro dialect. In standard English "s" is the agreement sound for third person, singular, present tense verbs. Many times Negro students will omit the "s" sound. The sentence, "He talks to me every day," becomes "He talk to me every day," and "My father comes home on the bus," becomes "My father come home on the bus".

In standard English in the third person plural, present tense, when the subject is they, the "s" is dropped as an agreement sound of the verb. In the cited dialect in the speaking situation, the "s" sound is added. For example, the sentence, "They work with me every day," becomes "They works with me every day," and "They look nice in their new clothes," becomes "They looks nice in they (their) new clothes." If the teacher knows this, he can point out ahead of time these characteristics of standard printed English so that when students read aloud, they do not practice inaccurate oral reading. In this way the teacher has the effect of enabling students to avoid mistakes rather than correcting them after they occur. The only way teachers can do this is to study the dialect of their students.

Reading skill usually exceeds writing skill during the developmental years in school. If students read inaccurately because of dialect interference, they are reinforcing the dialect pattern. This tendency will manifest itself when students attempt to write down their ideas. By teaching for the purpose of avoiding common errors of dialect and by promoting the accurate decoding of standard English, the teaching of writing or encoding their thoughts becomes easier. By avoiding the practice of using the wrong pattern, much "negative" reinforcement does not have to be overcome.

There are so many non-standard uses of the verb to be that they cannot be included here. Some of the most outstanding can be found in the present and present progressive tenses. To be is omitted in sentences like "He is running" ("He running"). In the sentence, "He is here," meaning "He is here at this moment," you will hear "He here". However, if the student wants to show that someone is regularly here, the dialect has the form "He be here". But to show that someone is continually here (that is all the time), the dialect has the form "He bes here".

The form "was" in the past tense is used for both singular and plural first, second, and third persons. The word "have" is omitted in the present perfect tense in such sentences as "I have been here". In the future perfect tense the forms be done are substituted for will have in sentences like "We will have gone" ("We be done gone").

You can well see how the use of these patterns interferes with comprehension of standard "book-type" English sentences. It is very important to understand simple words such as "is," "are," "was," and "were". But the important thing to point out here is that many students apparently never learn that "is" and "were" signal changes in time relationships within sentences, paragraphs, and stories. The precision with which it is possible to tie complex relationships together in a standard sentence such as, "By the time you arrive in Phoenix, we will have gone," must be explained to speakers of the non-standard dialect. Teachers must be aware of this type of difficulty and take time to carefully point out these relationships when they are encountered in print.

What are some of the suggestions which may be given to teachers of speakers of non-standard dialects to improve their own understanding of their students' language? Dr. John K. Sherk, Associate Professor of Education, University of Missouri, summarizes these suggestions as follows:

1. Accepting the language of the pupils; becoming aware that by rejecting the language of the students they are rejecting the students themselves; and realizing that degrading the students' language also degrades their parents, friends, and neighbors, and makes it more difficult for them to accept another language system because their own is not accepted.

2. Determining the items in the pupils' speech that require the focus of instruction; listening to the speech of the pupils analytically instead of critically.

If teachers have a concern with the above problems, they should endeavor to develop in their students key concepts of language. One of the basic concepts is that language has variety; there are numerous language systems in our society; we can identify them; each serves its speakers; the language system that is comfortable for the speaker and listener and communicates ideas and feelings is appropriate.

Another key concept is that standard English is the variety understood by most people--regardless of the dialect of English they themselves speak. Standard English is a kind of universal dialect in our society; important affairs of our society are carried out in this variety of English. It is therefore important that all students in our schools learn standard English as an alternate dialect; it must be mastered to the extent necessary to assure effective communication without embarrassment or discomfort. Students must understand and recognize those situations in which standard English is appropriate. The social, vocational, and academic benefits of learning and using standard English effectively should be pointed out to students.

Standard English and non-standard dialects are not entirely equal in power. A few differences in sound and grammar have been pointed out above. There are also qualitative differences between dialects which place the speaker of the non-standard dialect at a disadvantage in the dominant culture. Investigators have found that the most pronounced difference between standard and non-standard English is in the vocabulary. Children who speak standard dialect have words that show fine distinctions within concepts. They can be expected to have different words to illustrate such concepts as "fruit" and "vegetable". Too, many of the words used by speakers of non-standard dialects are slang words; they are not often encountered out of their own subculture and thus not useful in the classroom. A meager vocabulary reflects a qualitative difference in experience. Vocabulary is an outgrowth of experience. Stated in another way, experiences are the building blocks of concepts and words are symbols of concepts. It has been stated by experts in the field (Kenneth R. Johnson, TEACHING CULTURALLY DISADVANTAGED PUPILS), "If children lack experiences, their conceptual development and vocabulary will not be the same as others. In short, vocabulary reflects culture and if the culture is disadvantaged then the vocabulary it generates will be disadvantaged also."

It is not a simple matter to teach reading to students who use a non-standard dialect. Teachers must learn to communicate with these students rather than to talk to them. They will find if they show a genuine interest that the students will be eager to share their language with them.

Reading is a socially imposed cultural function. It is a "must" in today's society in order that its members shall participate in its communications. We must start with what children bring to school. To deny children the full and free use of their language is in reality denying them access to their cultural heritage, and we are denying them membership-in-full-standing in the society into which they were born.

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